

# Looking for Dialogue

The first step is for academics to check attitudes at the door

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Over a 40-year career as a professor of religious studies, a university president and, more recently, a system chancellor, I have taken counsel from the third-century apologist, Clement of Alexandria, who, wishing to speak engagingly to a “pagan” audience about the Christian gospel began by acknowledging, as we would say today, “where they are coming from.”

“Come, I shall show you the Logos, and the mysteries of the Logos, and I shall explain them to you in images that are known to you.”

Higher education’s audience today is no less skeptical than that Clement faced 1,800 years ago. It is large, varied and diverse in its expectations. As Paul Lingenfelter, president of the national association of State Higher Education Executive Officers, notes, today’s audience includes:

- Students who (regardless of age) want choice, convenience and quality. The higher the price tag, the greater the expectations for all three.
- Students (and sometimes their parents) who want low prices, generous financial aid, admission to high-status schools, convenient class schedules, good food, housing, recreation, freedom (students), safety (parents), small classes, contact with faculty, access to the latest technology, and cheap, ample and convenient parking.
- Faculty members who are highly qualified professionals and who expect: well-prepared students, above-average salaries and benefits, control of working conditions including schedules, office space, respect, academic freedom, a strong voice in governance, secure employment and good retirement.
- Policymakers who expect to deliver for their constituents: efficient operations, low tuition, access for in-state students, an ample supply of well-prepared graduates, satisfied parents, well-behaved students, docile faculty and staff and generous alumni.

So what do we do? One challenge as I see it is for us in higher education to work with our several audiences to develop a *shared language of expectation*. One of our most articulate colleagues, the late Bart Giamatti, challenged us to open a dialogue between ourselves in the academy and those outside it. He bid us to acknowledge that ours is—to the outsider—a truly strange world,

more ecclesiastical than corporate. To paraphrase Giamatti, the university is where values of all kinds are meant to collide, to contest, to be tested, debated, disagreed about—freely, openly, civilly ... the place where the seeds of speech first grow and where most of us first began to find a voice. It is neither a paradise nor the worst spot we have ever been in; it is a good place that continues to want to make her children better.

In short, our colleges and universities are enclaves society has created—and indeed has attempted to safeguard with protections—in which messy things can and should happen. They are places where mistakes can be made relatively free of the potentially devastating consequences had they been made in the so-called “real world.” They are truly testing grounds. Yet the very existence of such enclaves sets up a challenge we in the academy must embrace. We understand this; indeed we take it as given, but the risk is that we fail to understand how we appear to those outside. Our most urgent challenge is to serve as translators across that frontier of colliding expectations.

We know *what* we are to do. The real question is *how* to do it, specifically, how to begin. I am convinced the way to do so is by opening a conversation both *within the academy* and *with those outside it* with a goal of identifying true intersections of interests across both constituencies.

To begin developing a shared language of expectation with those outside the academy—policymakers, business and professional constituencies, the media and others—we need to confront the many “attitudes” of the academy. These are rarely voiced but they often seep into our public writings and statements nonetheless. They may take the form of mild impatience, subtle condescension, an ill-disguised petulance or an ever-so-cleverly concealed suggestion that the questioner really doesn’t know what she or he is talking about and that we’d much rather they didn’t poke their noses into our highly technical affairs. Whether we engage in a long, complicated, jargon-filled, statistics-laden monologue or fire back curt responses that have overtones of “shouldn’t you have known that?” we not only miss an opportunity but most certainly close off future ones. (For example, there were many moments when “attitude” on the part of those appearing before the Spellings Commission hearings in 2005 and 2006 frustrated the very dialogue on transparency and accountability that the commission was established to foster.)

I also believe we must be willing to resist our highly developed proclivity to say everything—with as much completeness as possible at the expense of saying something simple, direct, and hopefully even provocative. As scholars, we abhor sound bites, yet a readiness to put our arguments in straightforward language—unadorned with such qualifiers as “my learned colleagues would agree ...” or “expert research clearly demonstrates that ...”—we might be able to move the conversation to a more mutually satisfying plane. And yes, it takes care and patience.

We must also be willing to put away the time-honored argument from authority and engage personally and directly in discussion at a level of sophistication that may be quite different from our scholarly exchanges with colleagues. This is especially hard for us to do because we expect to be (and believe we are expected to be) masters of our discipline, whether it is an academic field or the more general area of higher education administration. Regardless of whether we are a specialist on student financial aid, institutional accreditation, curriculum development or new teaching and learning technologies, we need to draw on that expertise without calling undue attention to our possession of it. The potential for intimidation and all it can provoke remains a danger for which we should be on the lookout. We are often perceived by our publics as being so supremely self-assured that the potential of crossing the line into arrogance is very real and we miss out on informed but non-academic perspectives.

And lastly, I believe a common language of understanding is possible only if we genuinely try to see the issues as our publics see them, unfiltered by *our* years of experience, by *our* values and assumptions, and couched in *our* “academese.” We might ask ourselves when was the last time we tried to crawl into the persona of a legislator or a trustee, an angry taxpayer or a reporter. To fail to have at least tried is to fail to recognize the other end of the log on which we and they sit in these conversations that are not always of our choosing.

What I am saying is that a common language of expectation is possible only if we are willing to build a relationship. And we all know relationships take time to develop. They are not achieved simply by writing a position paper, though they can start there. They are not sustained by our simply deciding what our publics need to know. The recently developed Voluntary System of Accountability is an example, I

think, of a work in progress. Its eventual efficacy as a trustworthy source for reliable and useful information on the value-added of higher education will be realized only through an ongoing dialogue among academics and other stakeholders in which its components and formats are further refined.

To foster that relationship we must do what fundamentally we do best, namely teaching. We all know that the most effective teaching begins with respect for the other person, a genuine effort to understand his or her position, and a humility that allows us to learn from the other even as we seek to be understood.

Recently, Jim Lehrer, host of the PBS program, *The NewsHour*, spoke at a dinner celebrating the 50th anniversary of New Hampshire Public Television. His core message was one that resonated with me: “You trust us and our knowing *that* drives us to keep on earning it.”

I would respectfully submit that such a bond of trust is neither less important nor indeed less timely in our enterprise of higher education. As stewards of our publics’ trust, not to mention their resources, our relationship with them must be founded on no less than this.

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